

Don't throw this chance away

Brighton Downs Alliance response to: BHCC TECC Committee Report, 16th January 2020

Hollingbury Park & Waterhall Golf Courses

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

The report suggests continuing golf at Hollingbury (to meet demand) and restoring grazing at Waterhall (to address neglected nature conservation) but this fails to fully address the Council's declared climate and biodiversity emergency. These proposals exclude new possibilities at both sites: for archaeological and ecological restoration; community food-growing; and enhanced public access and recreation.

GENERAL COMMENTS

- **No public consultation** has been done with resultant missed opportunities. This is public land with no public voice (once again).
- **Local food production** - the report ignores the potential for community crop growing, despite suitable areas existing on the better quality valley soils on these two sites, close to existing allotments and buildings. BHCC has signed up to the City's Food Strategy, committing to supporting community food growing.
- **Funding** - These sites, particularly Hollingbury would be a perfect fit for the Changing Chalk Heritage Lottery Fund project, but no attempt to include them has been made.
- **Petition Figures** - The online petition to keep Hollingbury as a golf course has 1617 signatures. In contrast, 4420, have signed the petition for wildlife and consultation. (10.45am, 14/1/20)
- **Enhanced leisure facilities** - The public part of the report gives no mention of the detail of any enhanced leisure activities to underpin the profitability of the two site enterprises.
- **Long term lease concerns** - Signing 25 year leases rules out any changes for a generation. Shorter leases or opportunities to review them at regular intervals should be considered.
- **Thin on detail** - There is little public detail on these proposals to make an informed decision.
- **Hurry** - There is pressure to conclude contracts now, without any public information on the potential tenants or tenancy agreements. These unknown factors could create future problems.
- **Mothballing** - The report uses questionable mothballing costs to push agreeing contracts. It omits the positives of short-term mowing and grazing enhancing the land, and short-term business or residential uses of the buildings to safeguard the sites.

THE HOLLINGBURY RECOMMENDATION

Continued golf usage on a reconfigured Hollingbury course may be acceptable if it embraces the points below:

- **Roll back of the golf footprint around Hollingbury hillfort is essential** to create a viable grazing area. This will enable restoration of the landscape and archaic chalk and heathy grassland of the hillfort. That high value ecosystem is in desperate condition, nearing extinction.
- **A reconfigured course should enhance its Local Nature Reserve (LNR) designation** as part of the wider Wild Park LNR. New ideas for more ecologically sustainable course management should be embraced after public consultation.

- **Wider public access** at Hollingbury should be planned: a municipal right to roam over the course existed previously.
- **Functional links with nearby sites need strengthening.** This may involve adjacent open land to the east and north of the course, where the Moulsecomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project have a keen interest in greater involvement.

THE WATERHALL RECOMMENDATION

- **We welcome the acceptance of the principle of ecosystem restoration / rewilding.** The report's 'summary of bid' has some good points, but we stress that harm could be done without a prior **environmental audit**. The bidder and council must work in partnership across other council sites, departments and with other council graziers.
- **The public needs information before a decision is made** on the preferred Community Interest Company (CIC). There needs to be public engagement about the public's potential involvement, the **CIC's track record**, and examples of its conservation work elsewhere. The report notes the "expensive" management revenue and capital costs, with "the vast majority of funding" provided by "private capital investment", and "events". The latter is merely stated as "family occasions and business meetings", which would need to be pretty intensive to offset the "expensive" management and pay the rent.
- **The need for statutory public access is ignored**, despite the Council's excellent record of statutory access land at Paythorne, Home, High Park and Patcham Court Farms. By dedicating the area as Access Land tenant liabilities are reduced. Statutory access does not give a right to exercise dogs, so there is no contradiction between Access Land and need for controls on dog walkers to protect farm grazing stock, ground nesting birds and wildlife and prevent fouling.
- The current **clubhouse is visually and ecologically intrusive**, inappropriate in this erstwhile wild public landscape. It is unlikely that the National Park Authority would allow any re-development at the current clubhouse location. The report ignores the **opportunity to shift the leisure, education and farm buildings into the valley**, by Waterhall Farm cottages, where it could have a greater footprint than would be possible on the current exposed clubhouse site. This would enable small scale community horticultural growing adjacent to the educational facility, which would further expedite its educational purposes.
- **Education Centre** - It is unclear who would provide this, the bidder or others working with them? The Alliance has considerable expertise in this area.

WHERE NEXT?

The Brighton Downs Alliance reiterates that the council should not rush into a decision, but pause the process to allow the following processes to take place:

- 1) **Audit** - open and transparent, with local experts and organisations, to include: ecosystems, species, archaeology, cultural heritage, sustainable farming potential and public access.
- 2) **Public consultation** - full and informed, locally, city-wide and with SDNPA.
- 3) **Wider involvement** - with the Biosphere Partnership central to the process with any proposal examined in the context of a fully publicly-engaged Whole Estate Plan.

The Brighton Downs Alliance is a network of over 20 organisations and experts campaigning for the fairer, sustainably managed and accessible public downland of Brighton and Hove